



Department of Justice

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ALIEN SMUGGLERS PLEAD GUILTY TO HOSTAGE TAKING

Tampa, Florida - United States Attorney A. Brian Albritton announced today that Yoni Hidalgo-Calderon, a 22-year-old alien born in Mexico and illegally in the United States, pleaded guilty to hostage taking. Yesterday, a co-conspirator of Hidalgo-Calderon, Luis Francisco Pineda-Hidalgo, also known as Luis Saenz-Hidalgo, and illegally present in the United States, pleaded guilty to hostage taking and to six additional offenses of conspiracy to transport more than 25 illegal aliens; transporting 17 illegal aliens; aiding and abetting the smuggling of two illegal aliens; obstruction of justice; witness tampering; and illegal entry. The defendants each face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. Defendant Pineda-Hidalgo is scheduled to be sentenced on April 22, 2009, and defendant Hidalgo-Calderon is scheduled to be sentenced on April 23, 2009.

According to court documents, on September 4, 2008, at approximately 7:20 p.m., the Manatee County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) received a report from an individual identified herein as the complainant. The complainant stated that his brother, whom he identified as Pedro Gomez-Lopez, had been living in his native country of Mexico and had contracted with alien smugglers to smuggle him from Mexico to Florida for a fee. The complainant alleged that his brother was to pay the fee in several payments after arriving in Florida and finding work. The complainant received a phone call from the smugglers, while they were en route from Arizona to Florida, stating that the remainder of the smuggling debt was

approximately \$1,350.00. The smugglers demanded all of the money up front prior to releasing his brother. The complainant did not have the money and was not able to raise the money, but agreed to meet with the smugglers. The complainant met with the smugglers, identified later by the complainant to be Pineda-Hidalgo and Hidalgo-Calderon, on September 4, 2008, and attempted to negotiate a payment schedule. The smugglers refused and fled the scene without releasing his brother. The complainant then contacted MCSO. Deputies and detectives with MCSO Criminal Investigations Division had the complainant make contact with the smugglers once again to arrange another meeting. A Spanish-speaking MCSO deputy listened to the cell phone conversation and heard one of the smugglers, later identified as defendant Pineda-Hidalgo, tell the complainant that he had better not call the cops or he would not see his brother again.

A meeting was arranged for later that evening at the McDonald's near State Road 64 and Interstate-75, near Bradenton. The smugglers later changed the meeting location to the McDonald's on U.S. Highway 301, near I-75, in Ellenton, and the MCSO deputy again heard the smuggler (whom he identified as defendant Pineda-Hidalgo) tell the complainant that if everything went well, his brother would be let go, but that if he saw the police and found out that the complainant had notified law enforcement, the complainant would not see his brother again. The smuggler stated that there would be two men at the second location and that they would collect the money. The smuggler stated that when the money was received, the brother would be released at another location.

Deputies responded to the second McDonald's and apprehended the two men described by the smuggler. These men were identified as Jose Zavala-Martinez and Malecio Cruz-Santiago (two other smuggled aliens).

The deputies were then able to locate the van driven by the smugglers at a nearby Hampton Inn Hotel parking lot. The officers found four occupants in the van, one of whom was immediately identified as Pedro Gomez-Lopez. The person sitting in the driver's seat was defendant Hidalgo-Calderon, who had \$6,290.00 concealed in his shoes. The other two occupants of the van were Alberto Cruz-Aldana and a 17-year-old juvenile.

The second smuggler was not located in the van. Deputies searched the immediate area of the hotel and spotted Pineda-Hidalgo, who attempted to flee on foot and hid in a water retention pond. MCSO deputies eventually located Pineda-Hidalgo and placed him under arrest. When the officers searched Pineda-Hidalgo, they found more than \$23,000.

All of the subjects, including the complainant, were transported to a MCSO station and detained until Border Patrol Agents arrived on scene. Border Patrol Agents took custody of all eight individuals and transported them to the Border Patrol Station in Tampa.

This case was investigated by the U.S. Border Patrol and the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, with assistance from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Donald L. Hansen.
